Pentecost Hyperconnectivity
June 12, 2011
Day of Pentecost

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Psalm 104:24–34
Acts 2:1–13

"All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages."
Acts 2:4 (NRSV)

Praise and glory to you, creator Spirit of God.
You come like the wind of heaven, unseen, unbidden.
Like the dawn you illuminate the world around us;
you grant us a new beginning every day.
You warm and comfort us.
You give us courage and fire
and strength beyond our everyday resources.

Prayer of Adoration for Pentecost
Book of Common Worship

Come, Holy Spirit: come and open the closed doors of our minds to new ideas, new truth.
Come, Holy Spirit and open our hearts to others,
people we know and love, people we do not know enough to love.
Come and warm our hearts with the experience of God's love
in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Fire, wind, people babbling in different tongues, confusion, chaos, the Spirit of God on the loose—it makes an orderly Presbyterian like me very nervous. The Presbyterian church, after all, prides itself on doing things "decently and in order." Our constitution includes a section called "The Book of Order." We have rules and procedures for everything. We worry about spontaneity, emotional outbursts.

James Forbes, former preaching minister at Riverside Church, New York City, who came of age in the Pentecostal tradition, says that the very idea of the Holy Spirit frightens most mainline Protestants. And, admittedly, what the Acts of the Apostles says happened on the day of Pentecost long ago sounds more like a Pentecostal revival than a stately, dignified order (there it is—that word “order” again) of worship in a Presbyterian Church.

The topic begs for a favorite story of mine. Please indulge me for telling my favorites one last time, even though you’ve heard them before.

It happened on a Sunday morning in a church very much like this one, which is to say, very orderly. As the sermon began and the preacher made his first point, a woman sitting in the back of the sanctuary said out loud, “Amen, brother.” People turned around in their pews and looked at her curiously. When the preacher made his second point, she said, louder this time, “Oh yes, preach it. Preach it!” More stares and consternation and discomfort in the pews around her. When the preacher got to his third and concluding point, the woman stood up, raised her hands in the air, and yelled, “Praise God Almighty. Thank you, Jesus.” An usher approached. “Ma’am, is there something wrong?” he asked. “Why no,” she answered indignantly. “I have the Spirit.” “Well,” he sniffed, “you certainly didn’t get it here.”

As I began to think about Pentecost again, I discovered an intriguing editorial by Thomas Friedman in last Sunday’s *New York Times.* Friedman taught me a new word that I think is a helpful new way to think about Pentecost and the Holy Spirit. The word is “hyperconnectivity.” I liked it so much I put it in the title of this sermon.

“Sometime around the year 2000,” Friedman writes, “the world achieved a very high level of connectivity, virtually flattening the economic playing field. This web of connectivity was built on the diffusion of personal computers, fiber-optic cable, the Internet, and web servers. What this platform did was to make Boston and Beijing and Detroit neighbors. It brought two billion people into global conversation.”

“Now,” Friedman says, “we have gone from a connected world to a ‘hyperconnected world.’” It has connected Boston, Beijing, and now Baotou in inner Mongolia. “The deeper penetration of connectivity is built on

smarter cell phones, wireless bandwidth, and social networks. This newer platform for connectivity, being so cheap and mobile, is bringing another two billion people into the conversation from more and more remote areas."

Friedman observes that you can sit in your home in Chicago and see what is happening in Dara'a, the small town in Syria where the uprising began and where Syrian troops are shooting their own citizens. "Nothing," Friedman observes "is 'local' anymore. There are enormous social and political implications. Dictators can no longer isolate their regimes from the rest of the world and hide what they are doing to their own people by shutting down the newspapers, expelling CNN and BBC, so long as people have smart phones."

It is fascinating, this globalism, this worldwide conversation, this hyperconnectivity, but it is also spiritually, theologically, religiously significant, and it is, I believe, directly related to an event that happened 2,000 years ago on the day of Pentecost.

It is the pivotal event for the tiny Jesus movement in Jerusalem and Galilee, the rural north of Palestine. Pentecost. We call it the birthday of the church. But it was and is a Jewish holiday, fifty days after Passover. Fifty days for the little group of Jesus' followers after the cataclysmic events of his arrest, trial, crucifixion and then, three days later, the experience they could barely comprehend let alone describe, his resurrection.

They are waiting. Seven weeks and a day of waiting in that room that was their hiding place in the middle of the capital city. It would still be dangerous to be seen publically and identified as followers of the rabble-rousing rabbi from Nazareth. So they were behind locked doors, not in the temple saying their Pentecost prayers, when things begin to happen literally beyond description. The sound of a mighty wind, tongues of fire. Medieval artists loved to paint the scene with flames on the apostles' heads, like propane jets; El Greco's painting, the most famous. I was probably not the only youngster who, when I saw the Sunday School Pentecost pictures, thought the disciples' hair was on fire.

They do the most remarkable thing: they leave the room, their secure safe house for seven weeks; they come out, literally, go public. Then the most remarkable thing of all: they begin to tell the story of Jesus—not in the Aramaic, which was the language they all spoke, but in the languages of all

the people who had come to Jerusalem from all over the world. The whole world was there: Parthians, Medes, residents of Cappadocia, Asia, Egypt, Libya, Rome, Arabia. This new thing that was happening with the followers of Jesus had precipitated international connectivity.

What exactly happened? We can't know that, of course. Luke, who is the author both of the Gospel that bears his name and the Acts of the Apostles, is not a newspaper reporter but an artist trying to find words to convey huge ideas and concepts and experiences that simply will not be reduced to words. He uses extravagant images—rushing wind, fire—a little like Georgia O'Keefe painting a flower, conveying the mysterious reality of an iris with colors and shapes that are exaggerated and passionate and almost alive.

Here's what we know:

> Jesus' disciples, along with some other people, several women—including Jesus' mother—are still hiding, no doubt afraid that they will be arrested and perhaps crucified if they are identified with Jesus.
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> Something happened that changed their understandable fear into courage. They walked out of that room and began to speak: "Yes, we are his friends and followers. Yes, he was crucified, but he rose again and is alive. We're here to tell you about it and witness and verify its truth." Something happened to transform timid victims into brave and faithful Christians.
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> Something happened so that these rural Galilean peasants were able to communicate, to speak and be heard by people from all over the world. Jesus, on Pentecost, literally went viral, and separate nations, races, tribes, cultures—strangers to one another, isolated—became "hyperconnected" by the common language of God's love.

The miracle of Pentecost is people speaking and hearing, the miracle of communication. We believe in a God who brings people together, a God who mends brokenness and remakes and transforms separateness into oneness and wholeness and peace.

Luke wants us to know that the whole world with its marvelous diversity— racial, cultural, linguistic— was there on Pentecost. And Luke wants us to know that God's Spirit, the lively presence and energy of God, transcends diversity and creates something new: a community that speaks and hears and listens and understands; a community that communicates.

Peter Gomes, longtime minister of Memorial Church on the campus of Harvard, died recently. Peter was an African American with a particular appreciation for diversity. But he said something very wise:

> Diversity is a blessing, but it can be a curse. We are captives to our own languages, divided by our inability to hear or be heard, to understand or be understood. The diversity we celebrate so frequently and loudly has served to do little in the world but maintain difference and erect a wall of ethnocentrism behind which we can hide and from which we can protect ourselves from others. At Pentecost diversity was overcome by a power that transcended it, the power to understand, to hear in one's own language, one's own accent.

"Pentecost," Gomes observed, "did not reduce or diminish the diversity of the crowd: they did not become less than they were; they became more that they had been, because they became one with all who heard and understood that God is alive and active in this world" (*Sermons: Biblical Wisdom for Daily Living,* pp.100–102).

It's a word and an idea that could not be more relevant.

Chicago has the reputation of being the most segregated city in the United States. And now we are trying to cope with a series of criminal attacks on individuals by large groups of young men. They are black; the victims are white; and it is important that it not become the rationale for even more racial stereotyping and hostility, suspicion, and separation.

Because of Pentecost, we dare to believe that God is always working to bring together nations, races, cultures, not to override diversity, but to enable communication, community, communion.

In the church, particularly, God is always pushing, prodding us to listen to one another, to hear what others are saying, to communicate. That hasn't been easy for us Presbyterians recently because of our diversity, because of

different opinions and convictions on matters such as biblical authority, theological truth, and practical matters such as who can be ordained to offices and ministry in the church. For sixteen years we Presbyterians have said that no one except a married man or woman or a person who is chaste in singleness may be ordained as ministers or elders or deacons. After a decade of talking, arguing, occasionally shouting at one another, the church has now deleted that prohibition and given to congregations and presbyteries the right to make leadership decisions based on criteria other than sexual orientation. The impact has been huge: part of the church is happy and celebrating the change; part of the church is unhappy, disappointed, angry, and planning to leave or at least put real distance between the denomination and congregations that do not agree with the decision. Once again, in the long and fractious history of Presbyterianism, we seem incapable of disagreeing with one another and at the same time holding onto one another, speaking our deep convictions we do not share, but refusing to let go of one another, staying in communication, in communion in spite of our diversity.

Perhaps naively, I continue to believe that the church has an incredibly important opportunity to show a fractured society in a broken world that it is possible to preserve unity while respecting diversity, to show the world that it is not only possible but a good thing to love and listen to and try to understand the one with whom I deeply disagree—that is, to practice a Pentecostal connectivity.

I've been thinking about my saints recently, the men and women who have influenced me, made me think, made me reexamine my assumptions and positions. One of them is the late Hugh T. Kerr, who for years edited a helpful journal, *Theology Today*. I have in my file an editorial Kerr wrote years ago on communication. "Our failure to communicate," Kerr wrote "is not a failure of technique but of will. We don't want to communicate. We'd rather shout one another down." It made me think of all the conflicts and arguments I've been part of over the years and how little real communicating—speaking and hearing—was part of it.

It reminded me of all the conversations I've been part of in which I really wasn't listening to what the other person was saying but instead was busily organizing my thoughts about how I would make my point. I thought about all those frustrating conversations where I was trying to share something—an idea, an experience, a book I just read, a concern, a loss—and before I

was done speaking, my conversation partner had interrupted to tell me about his idea, the book he just read, her last illness or loss.

Sometimes in the most intimate human relationships, one or the other or both simply stop listening and instead retreat into the isolation and loneliness and hell of silence—not listening, finally no speaking, no communication, no communion.

This Christian faith of ours, from the very beginning, has been an unusual and remarkably connective religion. This faith of ours includes belief in the Spirit of God, the Holy Spirit, actively bringing together separate cultures, races, nations, and individuals. This faith of ours is in a God whose precious gift is speaking and hearing—communication—and who is always and forever working to bring together, to mend, to reconcile you and your dear ones, you and your enemies, races, cultures, nations, until the day when all the barriers and boundaries are gone and all are one and the kingdom has come; a God who in the meantime comes to each of us, sometimes loudly, aggressively, as at Pentecost, but more often quietly, softly, moving us to open our hearts, our minds, our lives, to God and to one another.

Paul Tillich, one of the most profound Christian thinkers of the twentieth century, could be maddeningly difficult to understand. And, like great thinkers, he could be profoundly simple. About the doctrine of the Holy Spirit he wrote, “The Spirit can work in you with a soft but insistent voice.”

When I read that again this week I thought about something that happened recently. It was soft, but insistent. It was last Sunday at the groundbreaking ceremony. Like all good Fourth Church events, the groundbreaking was carefully planned and choreographed. There were two bagpipers and a drummer to lead us from worship to the construction site. When we arrived, everything was perfectly organized. Everyone had a place to stand: the two trumpet players over there; the table with coffee, punch, and cookies back there; the shovels lined up over there; the pile of dirt here, perfectly mounded and rounded; the participants lined up in order; a platform and microphone; a printed order of worship. It was, I thought, a little masterpiece of Presbyterian orderliness.

And just when I was given the signal to begin the proceedings, something totally unexpected happened. Three-year-old Mia, standing with her mother and father, surveyed the scene, saw all that untouched and inviting dirt,

made a strategic decision, slipped away from her mother's grasp, walked out onto the dirt in front of 400 people. Her mother and father were quietly urging her to return, trying to tempt her back with toys. Mia looked at them and kept on walking. When she arrived where she wanted to be, she sat down on the dirt, put her little fingers in it, and had her own groundbreaking ceremony.

Now I can't know for sure, but I think that's how the Holy Spirit interrupted our orderly and careful plans, to remind us of why we are here and what is truly important, to gently remind us that God is always present in our life together and shows up in totally unexpected and surprising and compelling ways, just like Pentecost.

Amen.